March 31, 1964

MEMORANDUM

TO : Mr. Rankin

FROM : S. A. Stern and J. H. Ely

SUBJECT: Interview of Secret Service SA Lawson on Thursday, March 26

SA Lawson was interviewed from 3:00 to 6:00 P.M. on Thursday, March 26, 1964. Also present were Inspector Tom Kelley and Treasury Deputy General Counsel Herbert Smith.

Mr. Lawson is 35 years old; a graduate of Buffalo University in 1949. From 1949 through 1959, he worked in various sales capacities, except for the years 1953 to 1955, during which he served in the U.S. Army in Counterintelligence.

He joined the Secret Service in October, 1959. He served first in the Syracuse office from 1959 to 1961, during which period he served a three week special White House assignment in November, 1960, attended Treasury Law Enforcement School in April - June 1960, and Secret Service School in January - February, 1961. He became a member of the White House Detail March 3, 1961.

All members of the White House Detail do advance work for Presidential trips. A new agent begins by assisting more experienced agents and eventually undertakes greater responsibility. In the past two years, Lawson has done advance work for about ten cities, and was the senior Special Agent for about five of these. When not doing advance work, Lawson's duties are those typical of members of the White House Detail.

The Secret Service prefers to have at least two agents perform advance preparations. In the case of Dallas, since President Kennedy had scheduled visits to five Texas cities and had also scheduled visits to other parts of the country immediately before the Texas trip, there were not enough Secret Service Agents to permit two agents to be assigned to all the advance work. Consequently, Lawson did the advance alone from November 13 to November 18, when he was joined by SA Grant, who was arriving from advance work on the President's trip to Florida.

Lawson has done five memoranda on aspects of the Dallas trip.

(1) Preliminary survey report of November 19, 1963 (Commission Document #3, item 18). This interim report on the advance work was completed on November 19.

(2) Memorandum of November 23, 1963 (Commission Document #3, item 12, tab 9c). This brief report on the actual events of the assassination was written immediately upon Lawson's return to Washington on November 23.

(3) Final survey report of November 30, 1963 (Commission Document #3, item 7). This was completed on November 30 and is the formal final report prepared on the activities of a Secret Service Agent entrusted with advance preparations for a Presidential visit.

(4) Memorandum of December 1, 1963 (Commission Document #3, item 12, tab 9b). This was completed on December 1, in response to instructions to prepare a full report on all events of November 22, 1963.

(5) Memorandum of December 3, 1963 (Commission Document #3, item 12, tab 9a). This was completed on December 3, 1963 in response to instructions to prepare a full report on all events from the time Lawson was assigned to the Dallas trip until the arrival of the President at Dallas on November 22.

All of SA Lawson's reports are based upon his recollection as refreshed by sketchy daily reports and miscellaneous papers. The daily reports do not constitute a diary but merely a broad account of the number of hours worked.

Lawson's story is as set forth in his memoranda, with the following additional information:

Before leaving to do an advance, an agent checks Secret Service files for recent advance reports on the city involved, for leads to special problems. There were no reports of recent trips by a President to Dallas.

The final selection of the Trade Mart as against the Women's Building, was made, as far as Lawson knows, by a Mr. Bruno of the Democratic National Committee. Lawson had examined both buildings and had not indicated any preference. Each building presented certain security hazards, and each offered certain security advantages.

Lawson is confident that had there been strong reason to prefer one of the buildings, his recommendations would have been given great weight.

The motorcade route was worked out by Sorrels and Lawson with the Dallas police. Given the Trade Mart destination, and the decision to spend about 45 minutes en route, the route selected was the only appropriate route. This would not have been the case had less time been allotted to the motorcade. As far as Lawson is concerned, the Rowley letter of March 26 to the Commission, describing the release of the motorcade route, is accurate and complete.

Lawson designated press areas at the Trade Mart and at Love Field. These were approved thereafter by a White House press officer. The travelling press already had received press credentials; local press credentials were distributed by the local committee. Tight Secret Service control was not required, since possession of press credentials would not entitle anyone to entry to an unprotected area close to the President.

Regarding the determination of potentially dangerous individuals in Dallas -- Lawson checked with PRS before leaving and was advised their files contained no subjects in the Dallas area. Upon arrival in Dallas he checked with SAIC Sorrels regarding the local situation. It is Sorrels' responsibility to conduct liaison with local law enforcement, including local FBI, and appraise the advance man of any potential problems. Once a subject is identified, it is the responsibility of the advance man to assure that appropriate precautions have been taken. In this connection, and in every other matter affecting the advance preparations, the advance man is considered the representative of the SAIC of the White House Detail, with authority to direct the SAIC of the local office to do anything considered necessary.

Lawson would not describe the advance work for this trip as different from the typical advance preparations for a "political" trip as distinguished from, for example, a trip to a military installation where security controls are much easier to establish.

* * *

We then covered the actual events of the assassination. Mr. Specter may wish to interview Lawson on these points.

Lawson was riding in the front seat of the lead car where the advance man always rides to regulate the speed of the lead and pilot cars and maintain the necessary distance from the Presidential car.

The lead car is usually 40 to 50 feet ahead; at this point it was 70 to 80 feet ahead.

Lawson looked up and saw the first overpass, which the lead car was about to pass underneath. He saw about five persons on the overpass above the Elm Street throughway. These persons seemed to be dressed in workmen's clothes. There was a uniformed policeman right with them. Lawson motioned to the group to move off the overpass. He did not observe any unusual movement on the overpass, but in accordance with standard practice, strict instructions had been issued to keep all such overpasses clear.

He was signalling to the group on the overpass when he heard the first noise. He describes it as a sharp report, louder than the usual sound of a rifle; then there was a pause, followed by two more noises, closer together. At first Lawson thought the sound was that of a firecracker. The first report came just as the lead car was entering the underpass. When he heard the sound, he turned and looked behind the lead car. He is clear that the report came from behind and not from the overpass. Since he first took the sounds to be that of firecrackers, when he turned around and noticed people moving on the grass slope next to the throughway, he assumed that one of them had set off firecrackers. Then he noticed a Secret Service Agent in the follow-up car standing with an automatic weapon in his hand, and realized that something serious had occurred. He then thought that perhaps the sounds had been the firing of the automatic weapon. The Presidential car then accelerated rapidly, and came close to the lead car before the lead car also accelerated and instructions were received to proceed to the nearest hospital.

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We then discussed with SA Lawson events in which he participated during the detention of Oswald.

Mr. Lawson recalled that while he was at the airport, sometime between 2:15 and 2:55, he received a call from the Dallas police station reporting that a suspect had been captured. Then, along with Chief Curry and others, he proceeded to the police station. They arrived at about 3:30 or 3:45, having been impeded by heavy traffic. Agents Grant and Lawson proceeded to locate and join Agent Sorrels in the homicide area of the police station. Lawson recalls that police headquarters was in a state of chaos, that he spent most of his time running from room to room in an effort to gather facts to phone in to Washington.

The first time Lawson observed Lee Harvey Oswald was at about 5:00 P.M. in Capt. Fritz' office. In addition to Sorrels, who handled the interrogation, several other field agents and several police officers were present. Lawson recalls that this period of questioning lasted only "a few minutes" and that only general data -- name, address, recent biography -- was covered. Lawson stated that Fritz' office was "a fairly large room" (about 3/4 the size of Adams-Specter-Stern's office), and that outside the office there was a crowd of approximately 100 press representatives, including men with television and movie cameras and microphones. Lawson stated that Oswald was, during this period, wearing "nondescript clothes" and had a bruise on his face. Lawson has no recollection as to whether Oswald was handcuffed.

Early in the evening Lawson spoke to Mr. Zapruder and his employer (?) concerning the films of the assassination.

Sometime during the evening, Lawson recalls, a man who had seen someone through a window of the Texas School Book Depository Building came into the police station. A line-up was staged for his benefit, but the witness, although he stated that he thought Oswald was the man he had seen, refused to make a positive identification because he previously had seen Oswald's picture on television. Lawson thinks this line-up took place sometime between 9:00 and 10:00 P.M., and does not recall noticing any irregularity in it.

Late in the evening Lawson, as well as Agents Patterson and Kelley, was present in the showup room for Oswald's "press conference." He recalls that the room was full to capacity. Prior to Oswald's appearance, Mr. Wade announced that Oswald had been charged with Tippit's slaying, and Chief Curry briefed those present as to the ground rules of the press conference (stand back, ask any questions you want, etc.). Lawson believes that one of the questions shouted at Oswald was something like "Did you shoot the President?". However, there was so much noise in the room that neither Lawson nor Kelley heard anything Oswald said. It was the impression of both Lawson and Kelley that Chief Curry arranged for the press conference because he wanted to let the public and the press see that Oswald was not being held incognito or mistreated.

Lawson recalls that the remainder of his time was spent in deciding when to return to Washington and what evidence he should take with him. He departed for Washington early Saturday morning.